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UNCLAS VATICAN 000456

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EUR/WE LEVIN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [SOCI](#) [VT](#) [VTPGOV](#)

SUBJECT: POPE RETURNS TO VATICAN TO CONTINUE RECUPERATION; WILL KEEP RESTRICTED HOLY WEEK SCHEDULE

1. (U) Pope John Paul II returned to the Vatican in the early evening of March 13, after spending 18 days in Rome's Gemelli hospital. The Pontiff underwent a tracheotomy to facilitate his breathing and subsequent therapy to allow him to speak with a tube in his throat. Television coverage of his March 11 visit with two prelates from Tanzania and of his March 13 Angelus prayer revealed his voice to be weak and raspy; though difficult to understand, the Pope did not appear to be struggling to speak. The Holy See went out of its way to release video footage showing the Pope resuming his duties and participating in Mass to reinforce the image that he is still in charge. Despite the Pope's return, the weekly Wednesday audience was again cancelled, and the extent of the Pope's participation in upcoming Easter ceremonies -- which will be officially presided over by senior cardinals -- remains unclear.

2. (SBU) Following the Pope's televised midday Angelus Prayer March 13, the Vatican took gathered reporters by surprise by announcing that the Pope would be returning home. Spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls said the John Paul II would "continue his convalescence" at the Vatican. The tube inserted after his tracheotomy is still in place and Vatican sources say it will remain so for some time, and possibly permanently, though it will be changed monthly. With the risk of infection relatively high, it is clear that the Pope's public schedule will be strictly reduced for several weeks, and possibly much longer. It is unclear whether the Pope will be physically present at the Holy Week masses. He is currently scheduled to give a simple blessing on Easter Sunday.

3. (U) As it has been throughout the Pope's hospitalization and convalescence, media coverage of his release and motorcade from the hospital to Vatican City State was exhaustive: the Vatican Television Center had a camera in the rear seat of John Paul II's vehicle broadcasting a "Pope's eye view" of the fifteen-minute journey, with Italian and international media interrupting their regular programming to pick up the live Vatican feed. The Pope's increasing frailty has all major Rome media outlets on high alert, many having paid retainers to reporters and analysts for years to be prepared for a Papal transition.

4. (SBU) Comment: In the coming weeks, the Vatican will do everything possible to reassure the Catholic faithful and the media that Pope John Paul II is still in charge and competent to run the Church. Senior cardinals already limit their demands on his time and counsel, presenting him only with business requiring his attention because of absolute necessity or urgency. We expect his schedule will remain drastically reduced, with only heads of state, visiting bishops, and perhaps incoming ambassadors to have access. At many public events, the Pope's presence will likely be relayed via live television links.

5. (SBU) At this point in time, there is no indication that the Pope is affected by a life-threatening health crisis. He receives excellent medical care and his day-to-day condition is under constant scrutiny. The Pope has a history, when he has suffered physical setbacks, of adjusting to the new restrictions and achieving a new plateau for his level of activity. At the same time, one cardinal told a journalist this week, "We don't know whether the Pope will live a week or five years." The Vatican is also keeping an ambulance at the ready outside the Apostolic Palace. End comment.

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